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Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
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Seeking Thrills, Finding Love
John 3:1-17

In the gospel of John, people are first drawn to Jesus because of his signs.

It's been almost two years since we started working on our church sign
out by Glenn Avenue.

I remember at the time we were planning to put that sign up
a certain Penn Dot executive said to me
that after a lifetime of work in the field of transportation
he had learned that signs don't do much good because people don't read them.

Well, here it is in the Bible, Ray. Many people believed in Jesus because they saw his signs!


OK, so Jesus' signs weren't the kind by the side of the road.
They were things like turning water into wine,
and making a big, loud scene in the temple,
as he drove out the moneychangers, and turned over their tables.
These were thrilling, big-time moments that put Jesus in the spotlight.

So when Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night
he is primarily interested in talking about these signs that Jesus does.
...no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.

But Jesus deflects Nicodemus. He ignores his interest in signs.
Jesus talks instead about being born anew, born from above, born again.
Jesus is not interested in satisfying the people's thrill-seeking curiosity for more signs.
Instead, he wants them to have a new relationship with God.
Jesus invites people deeper into the world-embracing, world-saving love of God.
Today, Jesus invites us to greater depth, greater maturity,
in our relationship with God.

In a way, our relationship with God goes through many of the same stages of growth
that we seen in the growing love of a marriage relationship.
As a pastor, I find that my conversations with people about their relationship with God,
are often quite similar to my conversations with couples about their marriage.
And just as with human love, our relationship with God can be growing or deteriorating,
strong or fragile, healthy or unhealthy.

Recent studies of the brain have yielded some interesting findings about
what happens to us when we "fall in love."
This could be falling in love with another person,
but, it seems to me, it could also explain what happens when we "fall in love" with God
as with those who are dramatically converted to the faith,

or for lifelong believers who have a new and transforming experience of God.

The experience of falling in love is actually an altered state of consciousness,
brought on by a surge of an adrenaline called phenylethylamine (PEA, for short.)

When we are in the presence of one with whom we're falling in love, PEA surges.

1. physical symptoms – warm up, heart rate rises, pupils dilate
2. we feel less pain – depressed become happy, anxious become calm,
shy become outgoing;
we tend to focus on the positive, and deny the negative.
3. More energy; need less sleep; talk more; more alert;
4. Interestingly, it seems this adrenaline rush is enhanced by danger, fear, risk –
Greater the risk, greater the PEA.

Sounds like fun? It is! That's why we like falling in love.

And while I don't have scientific studies to back this up,

I believe that's a big part of why we like powerful religious experiences.

Here's the catch (there's always a catch):

When a people first falls in love, they get about 3-6 months of a "big hit" of PEA.

But after about 2 years, the adrenaline rush begins to waver and diminish.

At this point, for love to continue, it has to develop into something more mature,
something deeper, something longer-lasting.

Interestingly, studies have shown that the world average length of love relationship
is 4 years. Anything beyond 4 years could be considered "long-term."

Unfortunately, American culture has latched onto this PEA experience
and holds it up as *the essence* of true love – an adrenaline rush.

How many love stories on TV and in the movies are about those first days, weeks, months
of a love relationship – the romance, the passion,

people living in this altered state of consciousness,
driven by this adrenaline rush?

Think: Sleepless in Seattle.

In fact, happiness in general is understood this way.

You may have seen the commercial

which was aired about a thousand times during the football season:

This guy tells the story of how the doctor diagnosed him with

"adrenaline deficiency syndrome";

he's watching a football game with friends;

they're cheering wildly while he sits like zombie on the couch.

or he's standing 3 inches away from a ferocious, growling dog,

and he's totally unmoved, oblivious to any danger.

He has this lack of adrenaline, this "adrenaline deficiency syndrome",

until someone buys him a particular pick-up truck (whatever they're selling)

and as he drives this pickup truck wildly around in the mud

his adrenaline surge returns.

It would not be wrong to say, he has *fallen in love* with his pickup truck.

Funny commercial! The thing is, whether the ad-makers knew it or not,

this really is the sad reality of much of American culture.
We are burned out, frustrated thrill-seekers.
We've been high on the adrenaline rush for so long,
we need constant stimulation for life to just seem normal.
That's why we are on a constant search for new forms of entertainment.
That's why we have the epidemic known as mood shopping,
going out and racking up the credit card debt
because of the adrenaline rush we receive from owning new, flashy stuff.
When life becomes dull or painful, we go shopping;
we go have a love affair with consumer goods at the mall.

Other forms of adrenaline rush?

Driving Fast, Computer Games, TV shows like Fear Factor or Survivor
And of course we pay unending, year-round tribute to the American Sports God,
the God of Adrenaline.

Think: Steelers Football. Or Think (or try to remember) Penguins Hockey.
Adrenaline. We literally "love" these things.

Last but not least, the age-old, and probably the most destructive, adrenaline rush:
the extra-marital affair.

Now there's nothing essentially wrong with seeking an adrenaline rush,
nothing wrong with enjoying this altered state of consciousness, in and of itself.
Except for when it becomes destructive – as in an affair;
or addictive, as with many sports enthusiasts.

What Jesus tells Nicodemus in this night meeting is

we are created for so much more than thrill-seeking and adrenaline highs.
We are intended to experience deeper love, higher love, long lasting love;
what has been called "vintage love", love that gets better with age.
Vintage, long-lasting love results in different chemical response in the body,
an endorphin response;
an experience of fullness, depth, fulfillment, understanding and empathy,
an experience of great delight in the delight of the other.

To settle for one adrenaline rush after another is to stuff yourself with appetizers,
without ever getting to the main meal, much less the dessert.

Now, bringing these ideas into the spiritual realm,

this understanding of human physiology reveals much about religious experience.
People were drawn to Jesus at first because of his signs – they were dramatic events.
No doubt, they were thrilling experiences – healing, exorcism, dramatic encounters –
which produced in those who witnessed them an adrenaline rush
worthy of an NFL playoff game.

But when Nicodemus comes seeking thrills, Jesus gives him something else.
Instead, Jesus says,

Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.
Perhaps being born from above, or being born anew, or born again
means a growth – a passage – from a thrill-seeking, pain-killing adrenaline high

into a deeper love, a love that gets better with age, vintage love,
love that could be called...eternal.

This is the kind of love that *God has for us*,
love that is willing to risk, willing to sacrifice, willing to suffer,
willing to go the distance,
to know our long and tortured history and still remain true,
still remain with us long enough to create a new story together.

This kind of love understands that lasting joy is not usually a spontaneous thing,
but something to be worked for, something to be nurtured over time.

The love into which God invites us
is a love that is intentional about growing a relationship
that is fulfilling and deep and beautiful.

If our love of God has many of the same emotional, physiological and spiritual dynamics
as our love of other human beings
(and I believe it does)
then we can make a few observations about our spiritual journeys into Love,
and about how we grow in our relationship with God.

1. On the negative side, we can identify a certain unhealthy pattern
in American church-going experience:
A pattern known as church-hopping, or the revolving door.

Marriage therapists have identified a “revolving door” in love relationships.
These are people who move from relationship to relationship. Thrill-seekers.
As soon as the adrenaline rush wears off, as soon as the PEA is gone, they lose interest.
They are either unwilling, or just not mature enough, to do the hard work necessary
to grow into a deeper love.

So they move on to the next partner.

This can go on indefinitely – or in a small circle of friends,
a person could just run out of possible partners.

This same thing happens in people’s religious and spiritual lives.

Perhaps you join a church in a new rush of enthusiasm –

it’s the best church you’ve ever been too;

it has all the right elements:

friendly people, good music, programs for the kids,

good preaching, an approachable pastor, a fresh outlook on the world.

But after a time, the adrenaline effect wears off. PEA diminishes.

The more history you establish with that particular community,

the more you begin to notice the warts, the defects.

You discover the pastor is just as human, and sinful, as everyone else.

At times, the congregation can be downright ugly to each other.

You become disillusioned. You begin to struggle, even suffer. The honeymoon is over.

Then you have a choice.

You can say, “I don’t need this”, end that relationship and hop to another church.

Or you can realize that actually you do need this, that to avoid struggle is to avoid growth,

to avoid suffering, is to avoid deepening love.
(I'm not suggesting everyone who changes churches is doing this;
there are legitimate reasons – but a great deal of this kind of church-hopping does happen,
and it's usually a pattern for those who do it.)
The same may be true of Christian practices like prayer, or devotional reading of scripture,
or, especially, journaling.

Have you ever started a new spiritual practice and you were all gung ho.
The first time you practiced it, you felt closer to God in heaven than ever before.
And the mystical experience lasts for a while – it's thrilling.
But after a time, as you repeat the practice,
the novelty wears off, and it becomes work,
just like any old worn out religious practice.

Teresa of Avila, in the ___ century
confessed that prayer was the hardest work she had ever done.
It is the struggle of deepening love; the struggle of a growing relationship with God.

2. On the positive side, if we can embrace the concept of vintage love, long-lasting love,
and apply it to our relationship with God,
we may discover a life of ever-increasing spiritual depth and joy.

To grow in our love for God, we have to be intentional.
Intentional about learning God's story with us – the sacred story of the Bible.
Let's be realistic – Bible study is not always a thrilling experience;
it can be hard work.
But it is hard work that leads us ever more deeply
into an intimate knowledge of God.
As we learn the sacred story of God's relationship with God's people
we begin to see how our own stories grow out of that.
And then, eventually, we see that we share a story, a long, rich, intriguing story
with God – a story of amazing, long-lasting, steadfast love
and faithfulness.

In the context of this shared history with God,
we find it worthwhile to *work hard* to grow our relationship with God.
Joy with God. Passion for God and God's way, God's purpose,
is something worth great sacrifice on our part.
The greater our sacrifice for God, the greater our love.
We begin to delight in delighting God.
We find pleasure in the things that please God.
We find purpose in the things God cares about.
We find satisfaction and a powerful sense of well being
just by being in God's presence.
This satisfying love is not the absence of struggle,
but the maturity that comes in the midst of struggle.

Unlike the short-lived, time-limited, addictive adrenaline rush,
this love can be a deeply satisfying endorphin experience
that can last as long as it is nurtured, as long as it is *worked out*,

an experience of God that gets better with age.

Have you fallen in love with God?

Are you still in the honeymoon, or has it been years since you felt that spark?

The good news and the bad news is

a relationship with God takes work on your part.

The flipside is, for God to stay in relationship with *us*

certainly takes work on God's part! And God is faithful.

God works to keep loving us.

But our work that will find its reward, in a life of communion

with the Love that holds the universe together,

and offers eternal life to all who believe.